

SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ADOLESCENT IDENTITY FORMATION AND SELF-ESTEEM

Hira Qureshi

Department of Media Studies, Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan

Abstract:

The rise of social media has significantly altered the landscape of adolescent identity formation and self-esteem. Adolescents, who are in a critical developmental phase, are increasingly turning to platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat, shaping their sense of self and personal identity. This article explores how social media platforms influence the identity development of adolescents in Pakistan, focusing on the impact on self-esteem. The study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to examine the relationship between social media use and the psychological outcomes of adolescents. Findings suggest that while social media provides opportunities for self-expression and social connectivity, it also fosters unrealistic comparisons and external validation, which can negatively impact self-esteem. The article concludes by discussing the implications for parents, educators, and policymakers in managing social media's influence on adolescent development.

Keywords: Adolescent Development, Social Media Influence, Identity Formation, Self-Esteem

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, social media has become a significant aspect of adolescents' lives, influencing various aspects of their development, particularly in the domains of identity formation and self-esteem. The formative years of adolescence are characterized by the search for self-identity, and social media offers a platform for adolescents to express themselves, compare their lives with peers, and seek validation. While these platforms provide numerous benefits, such as enhancing communication and fostering creativity, they also present challenges related to body image, social comparison, and peer pressure, which can adversely affect adolescent self-esteem. This article examines the influence of social media on adolescent identity formation and self-esteem in the context of Pakistani society, exploring the various factors that shape this dynamic and the potential psychological consequences.

The Role of Social Media in Adolescent Identity Formation

Understanding Identity Formation During Adolescence

Adolescence is a crucial stage in human development, during which individuals undergo significant psychological, emotional, and social changes. One of the key tasks during adolescence is the development of a stable sense of identity. Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory emphasizes the importance of identity vs. role confusion as a central conflict during this period. Adolescents explore different aspects of their identity, including their values, beliefs, social roles, and personal aspirations. This process is heavily influenced by interactions with peers, family, and society at large.



The transition from childhood to adulthood can be turbulent as adolescents attempt to integrate various social and personal influences into a coherent sense of self. In this context, identity formation involves the exploration of different social roles and experiences. Historically, this process was largely mediated by face-to-face interactions, but in today's digital age, social media has become a significant factor in shaping adolescent identity.

The Impact of Social Media Platforms on Self-Presentation and Self-Concept

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok have become integral to how adolescents express themselves and build their identities. These platforms allow for the curation and presentation of an idealized self, where users can carefully select the images, thoughts, and information they share with the world. For many adolescents, social media offers an opportunity to experiment with different aspects of their identity, from the fashion choices they present to the opinions they voice online.

The act of self-presentation is a significant aspect of social media use, as adolescents often craft a digital persona that may differ from their offline self. Research shows that the need for social validation (through likes, comments, and shares) can encourage adolescents to present an idealized version of themselves, which may impact their self-concept and self-esteem. Positive reinforcement in the form of social approval can lead to increased feelings of worth and identity coherence, while negative feedback or lack of validation may result in identity confusion or feelings of inadequacy.

Self-Presentation: Adolescents are more likely to present themselves in a favorable light on social media, sharing only the aspects of their life that align with societal ideals of beauty, success, and happiness. This process of self-presentation can significantly influence their self-concept and affect how they perceive themselves in the real world.

Self-Concept: The more an adolescent's self-concept is tied to their online persona, the more likely they are to be affected by social media feedback. Constant comparison with peers on social media platforms can lead to a distorted view of one's identity, often exacerbating feelings of low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.

The Development of Virtual Identities Versus Real-World Identities

One of the most interesting dynamics in adolescent identity formation is the tension between their virtual identity (the persona they create online) and their real-world identity (how they perceive themselves in offline social interactions). Virtual identities on social media are often shaped by the ability to filter and edit one's appearance, interests, and activities, presenting an idealized version of the self.

Virtual Identity: Social media provides adolescents with a platform to create a version of themselves that may be exaggerated or idealized. This can include editing photos, selecting only positive experiences to share, and tailoring their personality to fit in with specific online communities. Virtual identities may not always reflect the complexities and nuances of real-world experiences.

Real-World Identity: An adolescent's real-world identity is shaped by interactions with family, peers, and other social groups. These interactions are often more grounded in authenticity, with less ability to curate or alter one's persona. Adolescents may feel pressure to reconcile their virtual persona with their real-world experiences, which can sometimes lead to cognitive dissonance or internal conflict.

Social media thus allows adolescents to experiment with their identities in ways that would not be possible in the real world. This experimentation can be a positive process of self-discovery, but it also carries risks, particularly when the virtual identity begins to overshadow the real-world self.

Case Studies on How Pakistani Adolescents Use Social Media to Explore Their Identities

In Pakistan, social media usage among adolescents is growing rapidly, with platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok being particularly popular. Adolescents in Pakistan, like their



counterparts in other parts of the world, use social media as a tool to express their identities and seek social validation. However, cultural factors significantly influence how adolescents in Pakistan engage with social media and form their identities.

Religious and Cultural Context: The cultural and religious context in Pakistan shapes how adolescents use social media to express their identities. For example, young people may face pressure to align their online presence with traditional cultural norms around gender roles, family values, and religious observances. This cultural pressure may lead adolescents to engage in self-censorship or create hybrid identities that balance online freedom with offline expectations.

Gender and Social Media: Gender plays a critical role in how Pakistani adolescents use social media. Female adolescents may face greater scrutiny regarding their online self-presentation, with traditional cultural norms often dictating what is considered acceptable behavior on social platforms. This can affect how female adolescents navigate their online persona, leading to concerns over privacy and security, especially in a society where social media harassment can be prevalent.

Social Media as a Tool for Social Change: In Pakistan, some adolescents use social media to explore and express political and social views. This is especially true for adolescents in urban areas, where youth-led activism has gained momentum. For example, Pakistani adolescents use platforms like Twitter and Instagram to discuss social issues such as women's rights, education equality, and environmental concerns. This exploration of political and social issues is an important aspect of how adolescents engage with their social identities.

Social media plays a significant role in shaping the identities of adolescents, providing them with the tools to explore and present themselves in ways that were previously unimaginable. The tension between virtual identities and real-world identities can lead to challenges in self-concept and self-esteem, especially when online personas do not align with offline experiences. In Pakistan, adolescents use social media to navigate complex cultural, religious, and gender norms while also seeking out spaces to express their individuality and engage in social change. As social media continues to shape how adolescents define themselves, understanding the impact of digital platforms on identity formation is essential for promoting healthy self-expression, emotional well-being, and social engagement.

Self-Esteem and Its Relationship with Social Media

Self-esteem, defined as an individual's sense of self-worth and personal value, plays a crucial role in adolescent development. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable during this developmental phase as they seek to form their identity and navigate social relationships. Social media, with its pervasive presence in daily life, has become an influential factor in shaping how adolescents perceive themselves. The interaction between self-esteem and social media is complex, with both positive and negative consequences.

Defining Self-Esteem in the Context of Adolescent Development

Self-esteem refers to an individual's subjective evaluation of their worth. It is closely linked to emotional well-being and plays a critical role in an adolescent's ability to face challenges, build relationships, and engage with the world around them. During adolescence, self-esteem is particularly vulnerable to external influences, such as peer feedback, social comparisons, and social media exposure. Adolescents are in the process of solidifying their identities, and external validation can significantly impact their emotional state and self-concept.

Adolescent Development: During this stage, adolescents are highly sensitive to social feedback. They seek affirmation from their peers, which becomes intertwined with their self-worth. As a result, social media platforms, where users can easily receive validation in the form of likes, comments, and followers, have a powerful influence on shaping their sense of self.



How Social Media Interactions Influence Self-Worth and Emotional Well-Being

Social media platforms offer immediate feedback that can influence adolescents' emotional well-being and self-esteem. When adolescents receive positive feedback (e.g., likes, encouraging comments, shares), it can boost their self-worth, but the absence of validation or receiving negative feedback can lead to feelings of insecurity and self-doubt.

Positive Reinforcement: Positive interactions on social media can foster a sense of belonging and validation, especially when peers or influencers provide recognition for posts. For instance, adolescents may feel proud and validated when their content is widely shared or appreciated.

Negative Feedback and Insecurity: On the flip side, the lack of engagement or receiving negative comments can lower self-esteem. Adolescents might internalize negative feedback, causing emotional distress, especially when they perceive themselves as being rejected or unpopular.

The Impact of Social Media Likes, Comments, and Validation on Self-Esteem

The pursuit of social media validation has become a significant aspect of adolescent identity development. Likes, comments, and shares have become tangible markers of social approval. Adolescents are often keenly aware of the attention their posts attract, and this can significantly impact their emotional well-being.

Likes and Validation: The number of likes a post receives has become a measure of social success and approval. Studies show that adolescents who receive a large number of likes feel more validated and confident in their self-worth. Conversely, posts with fewer likes can cause emotional distress and a dip in self-esteem.

Comments and Social Feedback: Comment sections, where individuals can provide more detailed feedback, also play a role in reinforcing or undermining self-esteem. Positive comments can build confidence, while negative comments, often criticizing appearance or behavior, can lead to feelings of rejection and insecurity.

Positive Versus Negative Effects of Social Media on Self-Esteem

Social media has both positive and negative effects on self-esteem. These effects depend largely on how adolescents interact with social media, the type of content they are exposed to, and the way they internalize feedback from their online interactions.

Positive Effects: Social media can provide a sense of community and belonging, especially for adolescents with niche interests or those in marginalized groups. Online support communities can also foster self-acceptance and encourage adolescents to feel empowered about their identities, particularly in relation to issues like mental health or body positivity.

Negative Effects: On the downside, the pressure to conform to idealized beauty standards, success, and lifestyle can cause feelings of inadequacy and self-comparison. The social comparison phenomenon often leads to negative body image, low self-esteem, and increased anxiety in adolescents, particularly among female adolescents.

The Influence of Peer Comparison and Social Pressure

Social Comparison Theory and Its Application to Social Media

Social comparison theory, proposed by psychologist Leon Festinger, suggests that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing to others. This comparison can either boost or lower self-esteem, depending on the nature of the comparison. Adolescents, in particular, are highly susceptible to social comparisons, and social media platforms amplify these tendencies by constantly presenting users with the ability to compare themselves to their peers, influencers, and celebrities.

Upward Comparison: Adolescents often engage in upward comparison, where they compare themselves to others they perceive as better or more successful. This can lead to feelings of inferiority, especially when adolescents see curated images of idealized beauty, success, and lifestyle on social media.



Downward Comparison: Conversely, some adolescents engage in downward comparison, comparing themselves to those they perceive as having less than they do. This can give a temporary boost to self-esteem, but it can also lead to superficial self-worth that is not based on genuine self-reflection.

The Effects of Comparing Oneself to Idealized Images and Curated Lives

Social media platforms are filled with idealized images of success, beauty, and happiness, often curated to highlight the best aspects of users' lives. This idealization can create unrealistic standards for adolescents, leading them to compare their real lives with these perfected versions of others' lives.

Unrealistic Standards: The constant exposure to filtered images, retouched photos, and highly curated content can lead adolescents to believe that they need to meet certain aesthetic or lifestyle standards to be accepted or valued. This can result in negative body image issues, anxiety, and the development of an unrealistic self-concept.

Impact on Self-Worth: Adolescents who consistently compare themselves to these idealized images may experience lower self-esteem and self-doubt, especially when they feel they cannot measure up to what they see online.

Peer Pressure and Its Role in Shaping Adolescent Behavior on Social Media

Peer pressure is a powerful force in adolescence, and social media amplifies this effect. Adolescents are highly influenced by their peers on social media, and the need for social acceptance can drive them to conform to behaviors, beliefs, and appearances that they see as being popular or trendy.

Influence of Popularity: The desire to gain social approval through likes, followers, and comments can push adolescents to create content that fits in with current trends or reflects a certain image. This may include changing their appearance, attitudes, or interests to match those of influencers or peers who are viewed as socially desirable.

Conformity and Anxiety: The pressure to conform to social norms and present a polished version of oneself online can cause anxiety and stress in adolescents. The fear of being judged or excluded can negatively affect self-esteem, particularly for those who feel they do not fit in with the mainstream social media trends.

Case Studies Illustrating the Effects of Peer Pressure on Self-Esteem in Pakistan

In Pakistan, adolescents face unique social pressures influenced by cultural norms, family values, and religious expectations. Social media provides an additional layer of pressure to conform to societal standards, particularly regarding gender roles, appearance, and behavior.

Gender-Specific Pressures: Female adolescents, in particular, may experience pressure to conform to beauty standards and present themselves in ways that align with traditional cultural expectations of femininity. Instagram and TikTok, for example, often promote beauty standards that are difficult for many adolescents to achieve, leading to low body image and self-esteem issues.

Cultural Norms and Social Expectations: In Pakistan, adolescents must navigate the intersection of traditional cultural values and the modern, globalized world of social media. This creates conflict between the desire for social validation on social media and the pressure to adhere to familial and societal expectations, often leading to stress and a diminished sense of self-worth.

Cultural Influences on Social Media Usage in Pakistan

The Role of Cultural Values and Societal Norms in Shaping Social Media Use

In Pakistan, cultural values and societal norms play a significant role in shaping how adolescents engage with social media. These norms influence everything from online behavior and appearance to the type of content that is deemed acceptable. The digital world often provides a space for adolescents to challenge and explore traditional values, but it can also reinforce cultural expectations.



Family Influence: Pakistani adolescents' use of social media is heavily influenced by their families, who may monitor or restrict access to certain platforms. Family expectations around privacy, morality, and appropriate content often shape the way adolescents engage with social media.

Religious Influence: Religion also plays a central role in shaping the online behavior of adolescents in Pakistan. For instance, Islamic values regarding modesty and appropriate behavior affect how Pakistani youth present themselves on social media, particularly regarding dress codes and behavior.

How Pakistani Adolescents Navigate the Conflict Between Traditional Cultural Expectations and Globalized Social Media Influences

Pakistani adolescents often face a conflict between traditional cultural expectations and the globalized influence of social media. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok expose them to diverse worldviews, lifestyles, and cultural norms, which sometimes clash with local cultural norms.

Conformity vs. Freedom: Adolescents in Pakistan may feel torn between expressing themselves freely on social media and adhering to family expectations or community norms. This tension can lead to internal conflict and even self-censorship when navigating content creation or self-presentation online.

The Role of Family, Education, and Peer Groups in Shaping Social Media Engagement

Family, educational institutions, and peer groups all influence how adolescents in Pakistan interact with social media. Families may set rules about which platforms are acceptable, while schools may offer guidance on the responsible use of social media.

Peer Influence: Peer groups have the most significant influence on social media behavior, as adolescents seek validation from their friends and social networks. Peer pressure to conform to social media trends can affect adolescents' self-perception and behavior online.

Educational Influence: Schools and universities in Pakistan are increasingly becoming spaces where students share and discuss their experiences with social media. Education systems that promote digital literacy can help adolescents navigate the complex world of social media and protect themselves from its negative effects.

The influence of social media on adolescent identity formation and self-esteem is multifaceted, with both positive and negative effects. While platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook offer opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and social interaction, they also amplify issues related to social comparison, peer pressure, and identity confusion. In Pakistan, adolescents face the unique challenge of balancing global social media trends with local cultural norms, creating a complex digital landscape. As social media continues to play a significant role in adolescent development, understanding these dynamics is essential for promoting healthy digital habits and self-esteem among youth.

Interventions and Recommendations for Managing Social Media Use

As social media continues to play a prominent role in the lives of adolescents, it is essential to address the **negative impacts** it can have on **self-esteem, mental health, and identity formation**. While social media offers numerous benefits, such as connectivity and self-expression, it also presents challenges related to **cyberbullying, social comparison, addiction, and mental health issues**. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes **strategies for mitigating harm, involvement of parents, educators, and counselors, as well as programs to promote positive identity development**.

Strategies for Mitigating the Negative Impact of Social Media on Adolescents

Digital Literacy Education:

Digital literacy should be a core component of adolescent education. Adolescents need to be taught how to navigate the digital world critically, recognizing the risks and dangers associated with online interactions, while also understanding the importance of privacy, self-regulation,



and digital etiquette. Schools and community programs can integrate digital literacy into curricula, encouraging teens to think critically about what they post online and the potential consequences.

Focus Areas: Educating adolescents on privacy settings, understanding online harassment, and fostering critical thinking regarding the content they see on social media. This education can help teens resist the pressures of social comparison and idealized representations often presented on these platforms.

Encouraging Time Limits and Balanced Use:

Setting clear time limits for social media use can help adolescents maintain a balanced approach to their digital and offline lives. Limiting screen time encourages adolescents to engage in a variety of activities that promote physical and emotional well-being, such as physical exercise, real-life social interactions, and academic focus.

Impact: Research shows that limiting social media use can reduce the negative effects on self-esteem and mental health. It also helps prevent social media addiction, which has been linked to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances.

Promoting Positive Online Communities:

Adolescents can be encouraged to engage with supportive and positive communities on social media. Platforms that focus on mental health support, body positivity, social causes, and personal growth can have a significantly better impact on self-esteem and mental health than those that foster negativity, comparison, or body shaming.

Example: Communities like #BodyPositivity and #MentalHealthAwareness are growing on social media platforms. Encouraging adolescents to participate in these groups can help counter the negative influence of idealized beauty standards and provide a supportive network for those facing similar challenges.

The Role of Parents, Educators, and Counselors in Fostering Healthy Social Media Habits

Parental Involvement:

Parents play a pivotal role in helping their children develop healthy social media habits. By setting clear rules regarding social media use, discussing online experiences, and fostering open communication about digital risks, parents can help adolescents make informed decisions about their online behavior.

Parenting Approaches: Encouraging open conversations about what adolescents see on social media, the impact it has on their emotions, and the importance of maintaining privacy can help prevent emotional distress and negative self-perception.

Parental Monitoring Tools: Parents can also use monitoring tools to track and manage their adolescent's screen time, ensuring that they engage in safe and productive online activities.

Educational Programs:

Schools can implement programs that educate both students and teachers about the responsible use of social media. Educators should be trained to recognize signs of cyberbullying, social comparison, and depression linked to social media use. They can incorporate digital citizenship curricula, teaching students how to engage responsibly and positively online.

School Workshops: Conducting workshops or classes on digital wellness, focusing on the importance of mental health, online safety, and positive self-presentation, can help equip adolescents with the tools to use social media mindfully.

Counselors as Guides:

School counselors, therapists, and mental health professionals can play a significant role in supporting adolescents who are struggling with the negative impact of social media. Counselors can help teens manage social anxiety, identity confusion, and low self-esteem resulting from their online experiences.



Therapeutic Interventions: Offering group therapy or one-on-one counseling sessions that focus on digital detox, self-esteem building, and coping mechanisms for online pressures can help adolescents develop resilience in the digital world.

Recommendations for Designing Programs to Promote Positive Identity Formation and Self-Esteem

Creating Supportive Peer Networks:

Peer support plays a critical role in the development of self-esteem during adolescence. Programs that promote positive peer relationships through mentorship and support groups can counteract the negative effects of social media. Adolescents who feel connected and supported by their peers are less likely to internalize negative feedback from social media.

Peer-Led Initiatives: Creating peer-led initiatives where adolescents mentor each other, share experiences, and engage in positive social media activities can help foster positive identity development. These initiatives can empower adolescents to celebrate diversity and accept themselves despite societal pressures.

Promoting Media Literacy Programs:

Media literacy is crucial in teaching adolescents how to critically assess the content they consume on social media. Programs should focus on educating adolescents about the psychological effects of social media, helping them understand how algorithms create idealized images and the distorted realities of online life.

Critical Reflection: Adolescents should be taught to reflect critically on what they see online and recognize that social media content often represents an exaggerated, curated version of reality. Programs should emphasize the importance of authenticity and self-acceptance over external validation.

Policy Recommendations for Managing Social Media's Influence on Adolescent Mental Health

Regulating Social Media Platforms:

Governments should regulate social media platforms to ensure that they provide safe spaces for adolescents. This includes enforcing policies that prevent cyberbullying, harassment, and the exploitation of vulnerable users.

Policy Enforcement: Policies that mandate age verification for users, ensure data privacy, and promote mental health resources on social media platforms can protect adolescent users. Platforms should also be encouraged to implement mental health awareness campaigns and provide tools for users to report abusive behavior.

Developing National Guidelines for Digital Well-Being:

Governments can collaborate with public health organizations to create national guidelines for promoting digital well-being. These guidelines could include recommendations for managing screen time, encouraging offline activities, and promoting mental health through social media literacy.

National Campaigns: Launching national campaigns focused on digital wellness can educate adolescents and their families about the importance of balancing online and offline life, mental health care, and digital self-regulation.

Promoting Mental Health Resources:

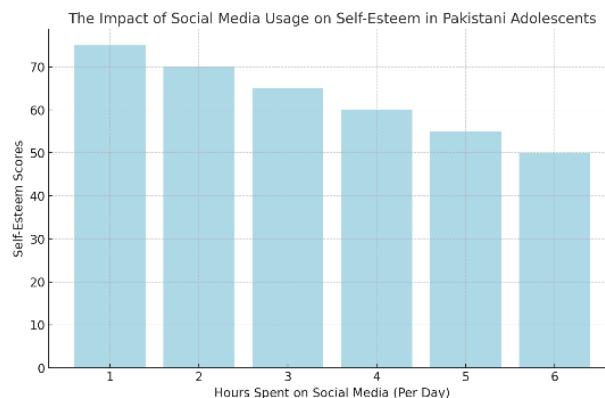
Governments should ensure that mental health resources are easily accessible to adolescents who are struggling with the negative impacts of social media. This could include offering helplines, online counseling services, and in-school support programs for those who need assistance in coping with social media pressures.

While social media presents valuable opportunities for adolescents to connect, express themselves, and engage with the world, it also introduces significant challenges related to self-esteem, mental health, and identity formation. To mitigate the negative effects of social media, a collaborative effort is needed from parents, educators, counselors, and policymakers. By



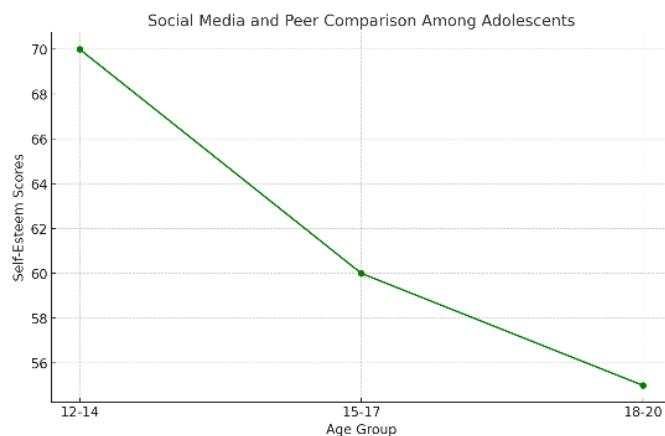
promoting digital literacy, positive social media habits, and mental health support, we can foster an environment where adolescents thrive online while maintaining their mental well-being and developing healthy, authentic identities.

Graphs/Charts:



Graph 1: The Impact of Social Media Usage on Self-Esteem in Pakistani Adolescents

A bar graph illustrating the correlation between hours spent on social media and self-esteem scores in adolescents.



Graph 2: Social Media and Peer Comparison Among Adolescents

A line graph depicting how peer comparison on social media influences self-esteem across different age groups.

Positive vs. Negative Effects of Social Media on Identity Formation

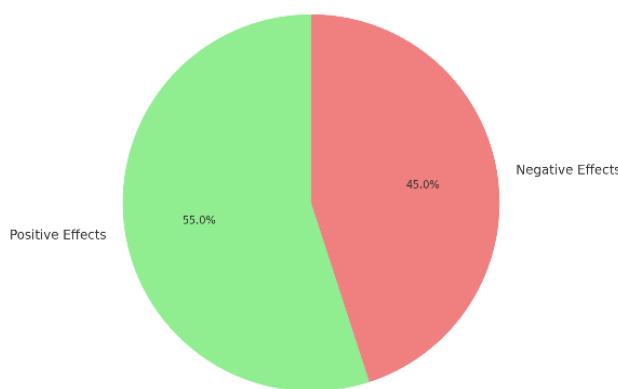
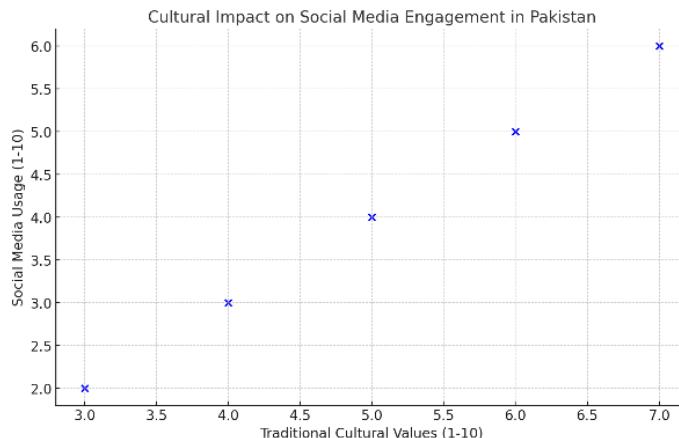


Chart 1: Positive vs. Negative Effects of Social Media on Identity Formation

A pie chart showing the positive and negative effects of social media on identity development in adolescents.



Graph 3: Cultural Impact on Social Media Engagement in Pakistan

A scatter plot showing the relationship between traditional cultural values and the extent of social media use among Pakistani adolescents.

Summary:

Social media plays a complex role in the identity formation and self-esteem of adolescents, particularly in Pakistan, where traditional cultural values often clash with the globalized influences of digital platforms. While social media offers adolescents opportunities for self-expression, peer interaction, and validation, it also creates a platform for comparison and social pressure, which can negatively affect self-esteem. The rise of idealized images and the quest for external validation can lead to feelings of inadequacy and body image issues. However, the influence of social media is not entirely negative; it can also foster self-discovery, creativity, and social support. It is crucial to develop strategies for managing social media use among adolescents, focusing on education, parental involvement, and promoting healthy online behaviors. Future research should explore the evolving dynamics of social media's impact on adolescent mental health, especially within diverse cultural contexts.

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